

Title: The Wraith - Vol. II

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We'd found it already, or I should say, it had found us. Its bright frosty-blue eyes had emerged from in the encircling blizzard last night, appearing as if from nowhere out of the gloom. I immediately took a swing and missed, but it didn't. It took out my navigator with a slash off its left claw, falling away into the blizzard, lost in the night forever. In the same movement, the beast carved up my companion with the right claw. There was no chance to defend ourselves, no chance to fight after that. We just had to run. It had now taken everyone from me. The last survivors. My family, my home. I couldn't even go back to the farm, not really. Growing food on the frozen plains that lay in the shadow of these hellish mountains was damn-near impossible. Getting the conditions right in the frigid temperatures, where ice never left the ground, took a lifetime of experience and my father had not yet managed to teach me all I needed to know. Twenty-two years apparently was still not enough to be a farmer in a world ruled by frost. All I had now was my goal, our goal. To kill the beast that stole my future.

We weren't even sure  
why it was in the village.  
Not in my lifetime, nor  
my father's, nor his  
father's before him, had  
a wraith left the  
mountains. He used to  
tell me all about them,  
as the hearth crackled  
away. The stories had  
grown even longer of  
late, with the new mining  
going on in the mountains.

They brought to the  
village some new stone  
fuel, and with it, the fire  
burned longer than ever  
— which meant the  
stories just kept on  
going. Stories of  
monstrous creatures in  
the mountains.

Bloodthirsty demons of an  
old world. My father  
would regale me with  
tales of wraiths cutting  
down weary travellers and  
seasoned knights alike. He  
himself had never seen  
one, nor had anyone I  
knew, but we all knew  
what they were. The  
stories were as old as  
time. The miner's work  
got me asking even more  
questions about my  
father's rules, though.

Why were they allowed  
into the mountains if  
they were so dangerous?  
Apparently, a combination  
of military convoys and  
fire-wielding sorceresses  
kept them safe from  
both the elements and  
the wraiths. I was a bit  
disgruntled with the  
notion that I was so  
incapable when they were  
not. Those feelings had  
long since passed.

I wandered through the  
frost-touched valley for  
what seemed like an  
eternity. The land was  
beautiful, but baron.  
There was no food, no

warmth, and no life, save the snow-laden pine trees that reached on for miles. I was feeling weaker and weaker by the minute. I had lost our supplies in the rush the previous night. The pack of food was now buried under inches of snow. I knew I'd never find it. I didn't bother to search.

Between dazzling brightness and dreary gloom, depending on how covered by clouds the sun was, I started to feel my resolve wain. I wanted to quit, to give up and leave this glorious, deadly place behind. But I couldn't. I thought of the mangled bodies of my family. The guilt was overwhelming. Had I been there, not out in the city chasing women, I might have been able to fend off the beast.

The village wasn't home to many able young men, only three, and none had been around when it came. Then I thought of my companion in the cave, the frost surely still biting at his quickly freezing corpse. The guilt was worse still. As they wept over their families, my heart filled with rage. I felt the anger wash over me, masking the pain — I knew that now, as the cold bit at my own heart and began to thaw the fiery anger that burned inside.

I had to almost drag our navigator into the mountains, and now he lay dead within them. My companion was only slightly more willing. The wraith took both his wife and daughter, but even he wouldn't have set foot

on these treacherous slopes if I hadn't driven him to it. I goaded him, playing off his torment. I had to kill the beast, it was the only way to unburden my guilty conscience.

Was the wraith that attacked us last night the same that cut down the villagers? It was impossible to say. They all looked identical, apparently. We didn't know exactly how many were living in the mountains, but we did know was they were mindless killers and even if I slew the wrong one, I'd redeem myself by culling a true vision of evil. Wraiths were ancient creatures, powered only by a lust for death.

I was always told that they didn't consume the flesh of their prey, they took the very life from them and fed off that instead. I didn't believe it, and I was still not sure. Except for the massive slashes across his torso where the wraith had cleaved him as he worked in the fields, my Father looked as he ever did when I found him. I expected the draining of life to look more dramatic, but maybe it wasn't something you could see.